

Lived Body vs. Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity

In her thorough and provocative essay "What Is a Woman?" Toril Moi argues that recent feminist and queer theorizing has brought us to the end of a constructivist gender rope.¹ While feminist theory of the 1970s found a distinction between sex and gender liberating for both theory and practice, subsequent feminist and queer critiques have rightly questioned the distinction. By destabilizing categories of both biological sex and gender identity, recent deconstructive approaches to feminist and queer theorizing have opened greater possibilities for thinking a plurality of intersecting identities and practices. Deconstructive challenge to the sex/gender distinction has increasingly abstracted from embodiment, however, at the same time that it has rendered a concept of gender virtually useless for theorizing subjectivity and identity. At this theoretical pass, Moi proposes that we throw over the concept of gender altogether and renew a concept of the lived body derived from existential phenomenology, as a means of theorizing sexual subjectivity without danger of either biological reductionism or gender essentialism.

Moi is not alone in proposing that feminist and queer theory question the usefulness of a concept of gender even more deeply than have deconstructive critiques, and I will refer to other recent writings that make similar points in the course of my discussion. I concentrate on Moi because her analysis of the evolution of our troubles with gender is so thorough, and because I find attractive her proposal that feminist and queer theory adopt a concept of the lived body to do the work that she argues that the category of gender does not do well. I find Moi's argu-

ment incomplete, however. While she is correct that gender is a problematic concept for theorizing subjectivity, there are or ought to be other aspects of feminist and queer theorizing that cannot do without a concept of gender. By reflecting on Moi's account of recent feminist and queer theorizing, we discover that these aspects, which concern social structure more than subjectivity and identity, have been relatively neglected. The oppression of women and people who transgress heterosexual norms occurs through systemic processes and social structures which need description that uses different concepts from those appropriate for describing subjects and their experience. Moi's proposal to reconstitute a concept of the lived body helps for the latter, but for the former we need a reconstituted concept of gender.

I. The Sex-Gender Distinction

Early feminist appropriations of what until then had been an obscure psychological distinction between gender, as referring to self-conception and behavior, and sex, as referring to anatomy and physiology, were very theoretically and politically productive. At this theoretical moment challenging the conviction that "biology is destiny" was an important feminist project. In order to argue for opening wider opportunities for women, we needed ways to conceptualize capacities and dispositions of members of both sexes that distanced behavior, temperament, and achievement from biological or natural explanations. A distinction between sex and gender served this purpose. Feminists could affirm that of course men and women are "different" in physique and reproductive function, while denying that these differences have any relevance for the opportunities members of the sexes should have or the activities that they should engage in. Such gender rules and expectations are socially constituted and socially changeable. Much of this early second-wave feminist theorizing invoked an ideal of equality for women that envisioned an end to gender. "Androgyny" named the ideal that many feminists theorized, a social condition in which biological sex would have no implications for a person's life prospects, or the way people treated one another (including, importantly, in the most consistent of these theories, one's choice of sex partners). These androgynous persons in the transformed liberated society would have no categorically distinct forms of dress, comportment, occupations, propensities toward aggression or passivity, associated with their embodiment. We would all be just people with various bodies.²

1. Toril Moi, "What Is a Woman?" in *What Is a Woman and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

2. For one statement of the androgynous ideal, see Ann Ferguson, "Androgyny as an Ideal for Human Development," in *Sexual Democracy: Women, Oppression, and Revolution* (Westview, Conn.: Allen and Unwin, 1991).

This appeal to an ideal of androgyny was short lived. Some of the turning-point texts of feminist theory in the late 1970s and early 1980s turned instead to accounts of the social and psychological specificities of femininely gendered identity and social perspective derived from gender roles. While not at all explained by biological distinctions between men and women, nevertheless there are deep social divisions of masculine and feminine gendered dispositions and experience which have implications for the psychic lives of men and women, their interactions with one another, their dispositions to care for children or exercise authority. Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, Nancy Hartsock, and others developed theories of feminine gender identities as expressing a general structure of subjectivity and social standpoint in significant ways defining the lives and possibilities of most women.³

No sooner had such a general account of feminine gender identity emerged than it came under attack as "essentialist." These accounts assume mothering as defining the experience of most women. They fail to inquire about the differences that race or class positioning make to caring practices, and they assume that women are or wish to be in relationships with men. They extrapolate from the historical specificity of twentieth-century affluent urban nuclear families and occupational structures, ignoring historical and cross-cultural specifications in the organization of family and work. Although the criticisms were not always voiced in the fairest way, most feminist theorists took their points to heart.

Queer theory broke into this dissolution of gender theory in the person of writers such as Diana Fuss and Judith Butler. Because Moi focuses on Butler's subversion of the sex-gender distinction, and I will support Moi's conclusion in specific respects, I will follow Moi in this focus.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler questioned the motive of feminist theory to seek a theory of gender identity. Feminists believe they need such a general theory of gender, she argued, in order to know what is the subject of feminist politics. Feminism has no meaning as a specific transformative social movement, it is thought, without an account of the "agent" of change, the subject to be liberated; that subject is "woman," and "gender" is the concept that displays what a woman is. As gendered, "women" are distinct from the biological sex, female. Butler argued, however, that the feminist distinction between sex and gender nevertheless retains a binarism of stable categorical complementarity between male and female, which reproduces a logic of heterosexual normativity. The very distinction between sex and gender ought to be put

3. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Nancy C. M. Hartsock, *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* (Boston: Longman, 1983).

in question in order to challenge any reliance on a distinction between nature and culture, or any conception that subjects have inner lives to which an idea of stable gender identity corresponds. Gender is nothing other than a social performative. The discursive rules of normative heterosexuality produce gendered performances that subjects reiterate and cite; the sexing of bodies themselves derives from such performatives. In this process of reiterated gender performance some persons become constituted as abject, outside the heterosexual binary. Radical politics, then, consists in troubling the gender binaries and playing with gender citation.

In response to the critical reaction of some commentators that her theory of gender as performance makes bodies and sexual identity simply a product of discourse, in *Bodies That Matter* Butler argues that the materiality of sexed bodies is itself socially constituted. She insists that such production of bodies is not "idealist," and that a valuation of "materialism" over "idealism" itself relies on a questionable binary logic.

Moi does not refute Butler's arguments, which she takes to be cogent, given their terms and methods. She argues nevertheless that ideals of subjectivity and sexuality have become increasingly abstract in this train of theorizing that begins with the sex-gender distinction and ends deconstructing a material-ideal dichotomy. It is not clear at this point what lived problems the theory addresses or how the concepts help people understand and describe their experience. Butler successfully calls into question the logic of the sex-gender distinction, yet her theorizing never goes beyond these terms and remains tied to them. This line of critique, Moi argues, calls for throwing off the idea of gender altogether as useful for understanding subjectivity and identity. Queer theory and practice bend gender meanings, aiming to loosen them from the normative polarities of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Moi suggests that queer and feminist theorists should make a break with gender altogether.

II. The Lived Body

For an alternative to the categories of sex and gender, Moi proposes to return to the framework of existential phenomenology on which Simone de Beauvoir relies.⁴ The central category for this theoretical approach is

4. Sonia Kruks gives a reading of the existentialism of Simone de Beauvoir that aims to respond to contemporary conundrums of "identity politics" in feminist theory. She too proposes to understand Beauvoir as developing a concept of the lived body useful for feminist theory, and she argues that interpretations of Beauvoir have failed to appreciate the extent to which she was influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the lived body; see Kruks, "Freedoms That Matter: Subjectivity and Situation in the Work of Beauvoir, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty," in *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 27–51. Debra B. Bergoffen also recommends a return to Simone de Beauvoir as a way out of conundrums of

that of the *lived body*. A reconstituted concept of the lived body, Moi argues, would offer feminists an idea that can serve the function we have wanted from the sex-gender categorization, without bringing its problems.

The lived body is a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it is body-in-situation. For existentialist theory, *situation* denotes the produce of *facticity* and *freedom*. The person always faces the material facts of her body and its relation to a given environment. Her bodily organs have certain feeling capacities and function in determinate ways; her size, age, health, and training make her capable of strength and movement in relation to her environment in specific ways. Her skin has a particular color, her face determinate features, her hair particular color and texture, all with their own aesthetic properties. Her specific body lives in a specific context—crowded by other people, anchored to the earth by gravity, surrounded by buildings and streets with a unique history, hearing particular languages, having food and shelter available, or not, as a result of culturally specific social processes that make specific requirements on her to access them. All these concrete material relations of a person's bodily existence and her physical and social environment constitute her *facticity*.

The person, however, is an actor; she has an ontological freedom to construct herself in relation to this facticity. The human actor has specific projects, things she aims to accomplish, ways she aims to express herself, make her mark on the world, transform her surroundings and relationships. Often these are projects she engages in jointly with others. *Situation*, then, is the way that the facts of embodiment, social and physical environment, appear in light of the projects a person has. She finds that her movements are awkward in relation to her desire to dance. She sees the huge city with its thousand-year history as an opportunity for learning about her ancestors. "To claim that the body is a situation is to acknowledge that the meaning of a woman's body is bound up with the way she uses her freedom" (Moi, "Woman," 65).

How does Moi propose that the idea of the lived body might replace that of gender, and the distinction between sex and gender? Like the category of sex, that of the lived body can refer to the specific physical facts of bodies, including sexual and reproductive differentiation. "Woman" and "man" name the physical facticity of certain bodies, some with penises, others with clitorises and breasts, each with differing experiences of desire and sexual feeling. A category of lived body, moreover, need not make sexual difference dimorphous; some bodies have

gender theorizing to which recent feminist and queer theories have come. See Bergoffen, "Simone de Beauvoir: Disrupting the Metonymy of Gender," in *Resistance, Flight, Creation: Feminist Enactments of French Philosophy*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 97–119.

physical traits like those of men in certain respects, those of women in others. People experience their desires and feeling in diverse ways that do not neatly correlate with sexual dimorphism or heterosexual norms. As a lived body, moreover, perceptual capacities and motility are not distinct from association with sexual specificity; nor is size, bone structure or skin color. Most important for the proposal Moi makes, the concept of the lived body, unlike the concept of sex, is not biologicistic. It does not refer to an objectivist scientific account that generalizes laws of physiology and function. A scientific approach to bodies proceeds at a significantly higher level of abstraction than does a description of bodies as lived. The idea of the lived body thus can bring the physical facts of different bodies into theory without the reductionist and dichotomous implications of the category of "sex."

The idea of the lived body, moreover, refuses the distinction between nature and culture that grounds a distinction between sex and gender. The body as lived is always enculturated: by the phonemes a body learns to pronounce at a very early age, by the clothes the person wears that mark her nation, her age, her occupational status, and in what is culturally expected or required of women. The body is enculturated by habits of comportment distinctive to interactional settings of business or pleasure; often they are specific to locale or group. Contexts of discourse and interaction position persons in systems of evaluation and expectations which often implicate their embodied being; the person experiences herself as looked at in certain ways, described in her physical being in certain ways, she experiences the bodily reactions of others to her, and she reacts to them. The diverse phenomena that have come under the rubric of "gender" in feminist theory can be redescribed in the idea of lived body as some among many forms of bodily habitus and interactions with others that we enact and experience. In such redescription we find that Butler is right in at least this respect: it is a mystification to attribute the ways of being associated with the category "gender" to some inner core of identity of a subject, whether understood as "natural" or acquired.

In a recent essay Linda Nicholson similarly proposes that feminist and queer theory focus on the sociohistorical differentiation of bodies as lived, rather than maintain a distinction between biological sex and embodiment and gender as historically variable. To the extent that this distinction between sex and gender remains, feminist theory continues a "biological foundationalism," as distinct from biological reductionism. The study of sexuality, reproduction, and the roles assigned to men and women should consist in reading bodies themselves and not presume a nature/culture distinction that considers gender as "merely cultural."⁵

5. Linda Nicholson, "Interpreting Gender," in *The Play of Reason: From the Modern to the Postmodern* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 53–76.

The idea of the lived body thus does the work the category "gender" has done, but better and more. It does this work better because the category of the lived body allows description of the habits and interactions of men with women, women with women, and men with men in ways that can attend to the plural possibilities of comportment, without necessary reduction to the normative heterosexual binary of "masculine" and "feminine." It does more because it helps avoid a problem generated by use of ascriptive general categories such as "gender," "race," "nationality," "sexual orientation," to describe the constructed identities of individuals, namely the additive character that identities appear to have under this description. If we conceptualize individual identities as constituted by the diverse group identities—gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and so on—there seems to be a mystery about both how persons are individualized, and how these different group identities combine in the person. With the idea of the lived body there is no such puzzle. Each person is a distinctive body, with specific features, capacities, and desires that are similar to and different from those of others in determinate respects. She is born in a particular place and time, is raised in a particular family setting, and all these have specific sociocultural histories that stand in relation to the history of others in particular ways. What we call categories of gender, race, ethnicity, etc., are shorthand for a set of structures that position persons, a point to which I will return. They are not properly theorized as general group identities that add together to constitute individual identities. The individual person lives out her unique body in a sociohistorical context of the behavior and expectations of others, but she does not have to worry about constituting her identity from a set of generalized "pop-beads" strung together.⁶

By means of a category of the lived body, then, "one can arrive at a highly historicized and concrete understanding of bodies and subjectivity without relying on the sex-gender distinction that Butler takes as axiomatic" (Moi, "Woman," 46). The idea of the lived body recognizes that a person's subjectivity is conditioned by sociocultural facts and the behavior and expectations of others in ways that she has not chosen. At the same time, the theory of the lived body says that each person takes up and acts in relation to these unchosen facts in her own way.

To consider the body as a situation . . . is to consider both the fact of being a specific kind of body and the meaning that concrete body has for the situated individual. This is not the equivalent of either sex or gender. The same is true for "lived experience" which encompasses our experience of all kinds of situations (race, class, nationality, etc.) and is a far more wide-ranging concept than the highly psychologizing concept of gender identity. (Moi, "Woman," 81)

6. See Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

III. Is the Lived Body Enough?

Toril Moi argues that a concept of the lived body serves feminist theoretical purposes better than a concept of gender. She defines those purposes as providing a theory of subjectivity and the body, and providing an understanding of what it means to be a woman or man in a particular society ("Woman," 4, 36, 14). Feminist theory, she says, ought to become a project of dispelling confusions concerning bodies, sex, sexuality, sexual difference, and the power relations among women and men, heterosexuals and homosexuals (120). This last phrase about power relations is extremely vague. Depending on how it is specified, the scope of theorizing power relations might fall beyond what I take as Moi's major emphasis in defining the tasks of feminist theory. She defines this theory as focusing on subjectivity, who one is as an agent, the attributes and capacities one has for experience, the relations with others that contribute to one's sense of self. In the essay I referred to earlier, Linda Nicholson also seems to consider that the theoretical function a concept of gender has meant to serve is one of theorizing self-identity and the social constitution of the human character.

Recent discussions questioning the stability of gender and the adequacy of a sex-gender distinction well reveal dilemmas and increasing abstraction into which feminist and queer theory have been forced or to which they have had to respond. These problems with a concept of gender have surfaced at least partly because gender aims to be a general category, but subjectivity is always particular. Moi's appropriation of the concept of the lived body offers more refined tools for theorizing sexed subjectivity, and the experience of differently situated men and women, than does the more blunt category of gender. Agreeing with this means dispensing with gender altogether, however, only if the projects of feminist and queer theories consist only in theorizing subjectivity. But I think they are not. The debates about gender and essentialism that Moi aims to bring to a close with her arguments have, I think, tended to narrow the interests of feminists and queer theorists to issues of experience, identity, and subjectivity. Her discussion clears the way for asking whether other aspects of a project for feminist and queer theory have been obscured by these debates, for which a resituated concept of gender might still be needed. In the remaining pages of this essay I want to suggest that a concept of gender is important for theorizing social structures and their implications for the freedom and well being of persons.

As I understand them, feminist and queer theory consist not only in giving account of the meaning of the lives of women and men in all their relational and sexual diversity. Nor are they only about analyzing how discourses construct subjects and the stereotypical or defamatory aspects of some of these discourses that contribute to the suffering of some men and women who fall on the wrong side of normalizing processes. Feminist and queer theories are also projects of social criticism. These are

theoretical efforts to identify certain wrongful harms or injustices, locate and explain their sources in institutions and social relations, and propose directions for institutionally oriented action to change them. This latter set of tasks requires the theorist to have an account not only of individual experience, subjectivity, and identity, but also of social structures.

In other writings I have articulated a concept of social structure specifically directed at the project of giving an institutional account of sources of injustice in response to the dilemmas that emerge from claiming that individuals share group identities.⁷ Structures denote the confluence of institutional rules and interactive routines, mobilization of resources, and physical structures, which constitute the historical givens in relation to which individuals act, and which are relatively stable over time. Structures also connote the wider social outcomes that result from the confluence of many individual actions within given institutional relations, whose collective consequences often do not bear the mark of any person or group's intention.

Alexander Wendt distinguishes two levels of kinds of structure, micro and macro levels. Micro structures refer to structural analysis of interaction. The patterning of practices and interactive routines, the rules which actors implicitly and explicitly follow and the resources and instruments they mobilize in their interactions can all be regarded as structured. Gender structures are very important to interactions at this micro level. In recommending that feminist social theory complement attention to subjectivity and identity with renewed attention to social structures, however, I am more concerned with what Wendt refers to as the macro level, which involves "multiply realizable outcomes."⁸ That is to say, social theory that wishes to understand and criticize the constraints on individuals and groups that render them relatively unfree and limited in their opportunities in relation to others need to have a picture of large-scale systemic outcomes of the operations of many institutions and practices which produce outcomes that constrain some people in specific ways at the same time that they enable others. Macro structures depend on micro-level interactions for their production and reproduction, according to Wendt, but their form and the ways they constrain and enable cannot be reduced to effects of particular interactions.

Social structures position individuals in relations of labor and production, power and subordination, desire and sexuality, prestige and status.

7. See my *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), especially chapter 3; see also "Equality of Whom? Social Groups and Judgments of Injustice," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 9.1 (March 2001): 1-18. There I build a definition of social structures by drawing primarily on ideas of Peter Blau, Anthony Giddens, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

8. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chapter 4.

The way a person is positioned in structures is as much a function of how other people treat him or her within various institutional settings as of the attitude a person takes to himself or herself. Any individual occupies multiple positions in structures, and these positionings become differently salient depending on the institutional setting and the position of others there.

From the point of view of critical social theory, the main reason to care about structures is in order to have an account of the constitution and causes of social inequality. Some people encounter relative constraints in their freedom and material well-being as the cumulative effect of the possibilities of their social positions, as compared with others who in their social positions have more options or easier access to benefits. Social groups defined by caste, class, race, age, ethnicity, and, of course, gender, name subjective identities less than axes of structural inequality. They name structural positions whose occupants are privileged or disadvantaged in relation to one another due to the adherence of actors to institutional rules and norms and the pursuit of their interests and goals within institutions. A structural account offers a way of understanding inequality of opportunity, oppression and domination, that does not seek individualized perpetrators but rather considers most actors complicit in its production, to a greater or lesser degree.

Nancy Folbre conceptualizes such issues of social inequality in terms she calls "structures of constraint."⁹ Structures of constraint include sets of asset distributions, rules, norms, and preferences that afford more freedom and opportunity for benefits to some than others. Constraints define the range of options available to individuals, or the costs of pursuing some options rather than others: time and money as basic assets. Legal rules function as important constraints, but so do culture norms. They impose a "price" on nonconformity. Preferences can be constraints when they conflict with one another. A configuration of particular assets, rules, norms, and preferences creates the constraints that define what we call social groups based on gender, class, race, age, and so on. Thus membership in the group called "women" is the product of a loose configuration of different structural factors.

To describe and explain some of the structures and processes that effect differential opportunities and privileges in contemporary society, I suggest, we cannot do without a concept of gender. Feminist and queer theories need conceptual tools to describe the rules and practices of institutions that presume differing roles for men and women, and/or presume that men and women are coupled with each other in intimate relations. We need tools for understanding how and why certain patterns in the allocation of tasks or status recognition remain persistent in ways that limit the options of many women and of most people whose sexual and

9. Nancy Folbre, *Who Pays for the Kids? Gender and the Structures of Constraint* (New York: Routledge, 1994), especially chapter 2.

intimate choices deviate from heterosexual norms. An important conceptual shift occurs, however, when we understand the concept of gender as a tool for theorizing structures more than subjects. We no longer need to ascribe a single or shared gender identity to men and women.

My own effort to respond to critiques of early feminist theories of gender turned in this direction of theorizing gender as an attribute of social structures more than of persons. In "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective," I draw on a concept from Sartre's later philosophy, his idea of a series.¹⁰ Gender, I suggest there, is best understood as a particular form of the social positioning of lived bodies in relation to one another within historically and socially specific institutions and processes that have material effects on the environment in which people act and reproduce relations of power and privilege among them. On this account, what it means to say that individual persons are "gendered" is that we all *find ourselves* passively grouped according to these structural relations, in ways too impersonal to ground identity. There I proposed that there are two basic axes of gender structures: a sexual division of labor and normative heterosexuality. Here I will take a lead from Bob Connell and add to these a third axis, gendered hierarchies of power.¹¹

The structuring of work and occupations by gender is a basic aspect of all modern societies (and many premodern societies), with far-reaching consequences for the lives of individuals and the constraints and opportunities they face. The core of a gendered division of labor in modern societies is the division between "private" and "public" work. An aspect of the basic structure of these societies is that the work of caring—for persons, their bodily needs, their emotional well being, and the maintenance of their dwellings—takes place primarily in unpaid labor in private homes. While recent decades have seen some changes in the allocation of their work between men and women, it is still the case that this unpaid caring and household work falls primarily to women. The operations of the entire society depend on the regular performance of this work, yet it goes relatively unnoticed and little valued. The persons to whom this work is assigned have less time and energy to devote to other tasks and activities than do those who do less of it. This gendered division of labor persists apparently because people collectively do not wish to organize broadly funded public services that take more collective responsibility for care work. Despite many significant changes in gender ideas and ideology in contemporary societies, there has been little change in this basic division of labor. Indeed, neo-liberal economic policies

across the globe have had the effect of retrenching this division where it may have loosened.

Feminist social and political theory in the last twenty years has documented dozens of ways that this gendered structure constrains the opportunities of those persons doing unpaid care work, mostly women.¹² They work longer hours than others and are rendered dependent on other people for provision of their needs, which makes them vulnerable to poverty or abuse. Feminist researchers have also documented how this basic structure underlies occupational divisions in public paid work according to gender. When occupations involve caring they tend to become female-gendered. Because many women arrange their public work lives in relation to caring responsibilities, only a relatively small number of occupations welcome them, which helps keep wages low in those occupations. The structuring of both private and public work along these lines exhibits gendered hierarchies of status and power, not to mention financial reward.

It might be thought that these structural consequences of a sexual division of labor describe Western industrial societies primarily. Theorized at the right level of categorical generality, however, similar structures describe much about many less developed countries, especially in urban life. As some feminist scholars of development have argued, for example, both government policy and the policies of international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund implicitly rely on the assumption that unpaid domestic labor is infinitely expandable, and that household caretakers are available to take up the slack in meeting the needs of their family members when food subsidies are slashed, school fees go up, or health clinics are closed.

A structural account of the sexual division of labor, that is, does not assume that this division of labor has the same content across societies. It is a theoretical framework that asks whether there are tasks and occupations usually performed by members of one sex or the other, and/or whether the social norms and cultural products of the society tend to represent certain tasks or occupations as more appropriately performed by members of one sex or the other. For any society, both today and in the past, the answer is usually yes, but there is nevertheless considerable variation among them in *which* occupations are sex-associated, the ideologies often legitimating these associations, how many tasks are sex-typed, and what implications this sexual division of labor has for the distribution of resources among persons, their relative status, and the constraints and opportunities that condition their lives.

10. In I. M. Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

11. R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987).

12. Nancy Folbre's book, cited above, is an excellent analysis of the operations of these constraints in several countries in Europe, Asia, and Latin America, as well as the United States.

A second axis of gender structuring in our society is normative heterosexuality. This structuring consists in the diverse institutional and ideological facts that privilege heterosexual coupling. These include the form and implications of many legal institutions, many rules and policies of private organizations in allocating positions and benefits, the structuring of schooling and mainstream media to accord with these institutions, as well as the assumptions many people make in their everyday interactions with others. Together such social facts make structures with differential consequences on the lives of different men and women, and which sometimes produce serious suffering or wrongful limitations on freedom. The system of normative heterosexuality significantly constrains the lives of men and women, with all their varying sexual and desiring inclinations, motivating some to adjust their lives in ways they believe will bring them material reward and acceptance, and others to carve out lives in the interstices of social relations where their desires and projects do not fit, or openly to rebel.

Cheshire Calhoun argues that lesbian and gay subordination is different in form from the structural constraints on the lives of women or people of color, for example. Whereas structures of female subordination or institutionalized racism confine people perceived as belonging to certain categories as having certain places or positions, Calhoun argues that persons who transgress heterosexual norms have no legitimized place at all in political citizenship, civil society, or private spheres. Structures of normative heterosexuality constrain lesbians and gay men by enforcing their invisibility.¹³

Institutionalized valuations of particular associations of maleness or masculinity condition hierarchies of power in ways that constrain the possible actions of many people seem quite resistant to change. Positions and practices of institutionalized and organized violence are most important here—military and police forces, prison systems, etc. In general, the structuring of state institutions, corporations, and other bureaucracies according to hierarchies of decision making authority and status affords some people significant privileges and freedom—and these are usually men—at the same time that they limit, constrain, and subordinate others, including most women and many men. Gendered hierarchies of power intersect with a sexual division of labor and normative heterosexuality in many ways to reproduce a sense of entitlement of men to women's service and an association of heterosexual masculinity with force and command.

When describing social structures as gendered, it is not necessary to make generalizations about men and women nor is it necessary to reduce varying gender structures to a common principle. A gendered occupational division of labor may strongly code certain occupations as female

and others as male, and these codings may have far-reaching implications for the power, prestige, and material reward incumbents of each enjoy. Nothing follows from this, however, about what most men or most women do for a living. Recognizing the structures of normative heterosexuality may well result in theorizing plural understandings of gender, varying rules and practices that make expectations on men and women regarding sexual interaction, relation of adults and children, social aesthetics, relationship of persons to workplace roles, and so on—rules that do not share a common logic and in some respects may be in tension with one another. Structures of a gendered hierarchy of power differentiate men from one another according to social roles and dispositions and do not simply differentiate men and women. The most important thing about the analysis is to understand how the rules, relations, and their material consequences produce privileges for some people that underlie an interest in their maintenance at the same time that they limit options of others, cause relative deprivations in their lives, or render them vulnerable to domination and exploitation.

In this essay I have agreed with Toril Moi's proposal that the existential phenomenological category of the lived body is a richer and more flexible concept than gender for theorizing the socially constituted experience of women and men than concepts of either sex or gender. The lived body is particular in its morphology, material similarities, and differences from other bodies. I have argued, moreover, that this proposal should not mean dispensing with a category of gender, but rather confining its use to analysis of social structures for the purposes of understanding certain specific relations of power, opportunity, and resource distribution. An obvious question arises at this point, as to the relation of lived bodies to these structures.

Another reason that turning to a concept of lived body may be productive for feminist and queer theory is precisely that it can offer a way of articulating how persons live out their positioning in social structures along with the opportunities and constraints they produce. I do not have the space here to develop the framework for such articulation, and I will offer only a few lines toward a sketch.

Gender structures, I said above, are historically given and condition the action and consciousness of individual persons. They precede that action and consciousness. Each person experiences aspects of gender structures as facticity, as sociohistorical givens with which she or he must deal. Every person faces the question of what to wear, for example, and clothing options and conventions derive from multiple structures of profit seeking, class and occupational distinction, income distribution, heterosexual normativity, and spaces and expectations of occasions and activities and the possibilities of conformity and transgression they bring. However limited the choices or the resources to enact them, each person takes up the constrained possibilities that gender structures offer in their own way, forming their own habits as variations on those possi-

13. Cheshire Calhoun, *Feminism, the Family, and the Politics of the Closet: Lesbian and Gay Displacement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

bilities, or actively trying to resist or refigure them. Gender as structured is also lived through individual bodies, always as personal experiential response and not as a set of attributes that individuals have in common.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* offers one interpretation of how generalized social structures are produced and reproduced in the movement and interaction of bodies. Especially in his understanding of gender structures, however, Bourdieu's understanding of the relation of social structures to actors and experience conceptualizes these structures too rigidly and ahistorically.¹⁴ It may be more fruitful to draw on a theory of the lived body like that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty but connect it more explicitly than he does to how the body lives out its positions in social structures of the division of labor, hierarchies of power, and norms of sexuality.¹⁵ Under the influence of such a theory of how bodies live out their structured positioning, moreover, one might find that a deconstructive gender theory such as Judith Butler's appears not as a theory of the determination or constitution of gendered subjects, but as a theory of the variable movements of habituated bodies reacting to, reproducing, and modifying structures.

14. See for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), especially chapters 3 and 4. Toril Moi herself explores the implications of Bourdieu's theory for feminist theory; see "Appropriating Bourdieu: Feminist Theory and Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture," chapter 3 of *What Is a Woman?*. Bourdieu's book, *La Domination masculine* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1998), assumes that he can generalize about gender structures largely from his observations of Kabylie society in North Africa.

15. Nick Crossley argues that a reconstruction of Merleau-Ponty's theory of sociality and habit can serve social theory better than Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* because Merleau-Ponty's conceptualization gives more place to freedom and individual difference. See Crossley, "The Phenomenological Habitus and Its Construction," *Theory and Society* 30 (2001): 81–120; see also Crossley's "Habitus, Agency, and Change: Engaging with Bourdieu," paper presented at "Philosophy of the Social Science," Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, May 2001.

Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality

In discussing the fundamental significance of lateral space, which is one of the unique spatial dimensions generated by the human upright posture, Erwin Straus pauses at "the remarkable difference in the manner of throwing of the two sexes" (157).¹ Citing a study and photographs of young boys and girls, he describes the difference as follows:

The girl of five does not make any use of lateral space. She does not stretch her arm sideward; she does not twist her trunk; she does not move her legs, which remain side by side. All she does in preparation for throwing is to lift her right arm forward to the horizontal and to bend the forearm backward in a pronate position. . . . The ball is released without force, speed, or accurate aim. . . . A boy of the same age, when preparing to throw, stretches his right arm sideward and backward; supinates the forearm; twists, turns and bends his trunk; and moves his right foot backward. From this stance, he can support his throwing almost with the full

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1. Erwin W. Straus, "The Upright Posture," *Phenomenological Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 137–65. References to particular pages are indicated in the text.

strength of his total motorium. . . . The ball leaves the hand with considerable acceleration; it moves toward its goal in a long flat curve. (157–60)²

Though he does not stop to trouble himself with the problem for long, Straus makes a few remarks in the attempt to explain this “remarkable difference.” Since the difference is observed at such an early age, he says, it seems to be “the manifestation of a biological, not an acquired, difference” (157). He is somewhat at a loss, however, to specify the source of the difference. Since the feminine style of throwing is observed in young children, it cannot result from the development of the breast. Straus provides further evidence against the breast by pointing out that “it seems certain” that the Amazons, who cut off their right breasts, “threw a ball just like our Betty’s, Mary’s and Susan’s” (158). Having thus dismissed the breast, Straus considers the weaker muscle power of the girl as an explanation of the difference but concludes that the girl should be expected to compensate for such relative weakness with the added preparation of reaching around and back. Straus explains the difference in style of throwing by referring to a “feminine attitude” in relation to the world and to space. The difference for him is biologically based, but he denies that it is specifically anatomical. Girls throw in a way different from boys because girls are “feminine.”

What is even more amazing than this “explanation” is the fact that a perspective that takes body comportment and movement as definitive for the structure and meaning of human lived experience devotes no more than an incidental page to such a “remarkable difference” between masculine and feminine body comportment and style of movement, for throwing is by no means the only activity in which such a difference can be observed. If there are indeed typically “feminine” styles of body comportment and movement, this should generate for the existential phenomenologist a concern to specify such a differentiation of the modalities of the lived body. Yet Straus is by no means alone in his failure to describe the modalities, meaning, and implications of the difference between “masculine” and “feminine” body comportment and movement.

A virtue of Straus’s account of the typical difference of the sexes in throwing is that he does not explain this difference on the basis of physical attributes. Straus is convinced, however, that the early age at which

2. Studies continue to be performed that arrive at similar observations. See, for example, Lolas E. Kalverson, Mary Ann Robertson, M. Joanne Safrit, and Thomas W. Roberts, “Effect of Guided Practice on Overhand Throw Ball Velocities of Kindergarten Children,” *Research Quarterly* (American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation) 48 (May 1977): 311–18. The study found that boys achieved significantly greater velocities than girls did. See also F. J. J. Buytendijk’s remarks in *Woman: A Contemporary View* (New York: Newman Press, 1968), 144–45. In raising the example of throwing, Buytendijk is concerned to stress, as am I in this essay, that the important thing to investigate is not the strictly physical phenomenon, but rather the manner in which each sex projects her or his Being-in-the-world through movement.

the difference appears shows that it is not an acquired difference, and thus he is forced back onto a mysterious “feminine essence” in order to explain it. The feminist denial that the real differences in behavior and psychology between men and women can be attributed to some natural and eternal feminine essence is perhaps most thoroughly and systematically expressed by Beauvoir. Every human existence is defined by its *situation*; the particular existence of the female person is no less defined by the historical, cultural, social, and economic limits of her situation. We reduce women’s condition simply to unintelligibility if we “explain” it by appeal to some natural and ahistorical feminine essence. In denying such a feminine essence, however, we should not fall into that “nominalism” that denies the real differences in the behavior and experiences of men and women. Even though there is no eternal feminine essence, there is “a common basis which underlies every individual female existence in the present state of education and custom.”³ The situation of women within a given sociohistorical set of circumstances, despite the individual variation in each woman’s experience, opportunities, and possibilities, has a unity that can be described and made intelligible. It should be emphasized, however, that this unity is specific to a particular social formation during a particular epoch.

Beauvoir proceeds to give such an account of the situation of women with remarkable depth, clarity, and ingenuity. Yet she also, to a large extent, fails to give a place to the status and orientation of the woman’s body as relating to its surroundings in living action. When Beauvoir does talk about the woman’s bodily being and her physical relation to her surroundings, she tends to focus on the more evident facts of a woman’s physiology. She discusses how women experience the body as a burden, how the hormonal and physiological changes the body undergoes at puberty, during menstruation and pregnancy, are felt to be fearful and mysterious, and she claims that these phenomena weigh down the woman’s existence by tying her to nature, immanence, and the requirements of the species at the expense of her own individuality.⁴ By largely ignoring the situatedness of the woman’s actual bodily movement and orientation to its surroundings and its world, Beauvoir tends to create the impression that it is woman’s anatomy and physiology *as such* that at least in part determine her unfree status.⁵

3. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), xxxv. See also Buytendijk, 175–76.

4. See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, chapter 1, “The Data of Biology.”

5. Shulamith Firestone claims that Beauvoir’s account served as the basis of her own thesis that the oppression of women is rooted in nature and thus to be overcome requires the transcendence of nature itself. See *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970). Beauvoir would claim that Firestone is guilty of desituating woman’s situation by pinning a source on nature as such. That Firestone would find inspiration for her thesis in Beauvoir, however, indicates that perhaps de Beauvoir has not steered away from causes in “nature” as much as is desirable.

This essay seeks to begin to fill a gap that thus exists in both existential phenomenology and feminist theory. It traces in a provisional way some of the basic modalities of feminine body comportment, manner of moving, and relation in space. It brings intelligibility and significance to certain observable and rather ordinary ways in which women in our society typically comport themselves and move differently from the ways that men do. In accordance with the existentialist concern with the situatedness of human experience, I make no claim to the universality of this typicality of the bodily comportment of women and the phenomenological description based on it. The account developed here claims only to describe the modalities of feminine bodily existence for women situated in contemporary advanced industrial, urban, and commercial society. Elements of the account developed here may or may not apply to the situation of woman in other societies and other epochs, but it is not the concern of this essay to determine to which, if any, other social circumstances this account applies.

The scope of bodily existence and movement with which I am concerned here is also limited. I concentrate primarily on those sorts of bodily activities that relate to the comportment or orientation of the body as a whole, that entail gross movement, or that require the enlistment of strength and the confrontation of the body's capacities and possibilities with the resistance and malleability of things. The kind of movement I am primarily concerned with is movement in which the body aims to accomplish a definite purpose or task. There are thus many aspects of feminine bodily existence that I leave out of this account. Most notable of these is the body in its sexual being. Another aspect of bodily existence, among others, that I leave unconsidered is structured body movement that does not have a particular aim—for example, dancing. Besides reasons of space, this limitation of subject is based on the conviction, derived primarily from Merleau-Ponty, that it is the ordinary purposive orientation of the body as a whole toward things and its environment that initially defines the relation of a subject to its world. Thus a focus upon ways in which the feminine body frequently or typically conducts itself in such comportment or movement may be particularly revelatory of the structures of feminine existence.⁶

Before entering the analysis, I should clarify what I mean here by "feminine" existence. In accordance with Beauvoir's understanding, I

6. In his discussion of the "dynamics of feminine existence," Buytendijk focuses precisely on those sorts of motions that are aimless. He claims that it is through these kinds of expressive movements—e.g., walking for the sake of walking—and not through action aimed at the accomplishment of particular purposes that the pure image of masculine or feminine existence is manifest (*Woman: A Contemporary View*, 278–79). Such an approach, however, contradicts the basic existentialist assumption that Being-in-the-world consists in projecting purposes and goals that structure one's situatedness. While there is certainly something to be learned from reflecting upon feminine movement in noninstru-

take "femininity" to designate not a mysterious quality or essence that all women have by virtue of their being biologically female. It is, rather, a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical *situation* of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves. Defined as such, it is not necessary that *any* women be "feminine"—that is, it is not necessary that there be distinctive structures and behavior typical of the situation of women.⁷ This understanding of "feminine" existence makes it possible to say that some women escape or transcend the typical situation and definition of women in various degrees and respects. I mention this primarily to indicate that the account offered here of the modalities of feminine bodily existence is not to be falsified by referring to some individual women to whom aspects of the account do not apply, or even to some individual men to whom they do.

The account developed here combines the insights of the theory of the lived body as expressed by Merleau-Ponty and the theory of the situation of women as developed by Beauvoir. I assume that at the most basic descriptive level, Merleau-Ponty's account of the relation of the lived body to its world, as developed in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, applies to any human existence in a general way. At a more specific level, however, there is a particular style of bodily comportment that is typical of feminine existence, and this style consists of particular *modalities* of the structures and conditions of the body's existence in the world.⁸

As a framework for developing these modalities, I rely on Beauvoir's account of woman's existence in patriarchal society as defined by a basic tension between immanence and transcendence.⁹ The culture and society in which the female person dwells defines woman as Other, as the inessential correlate to man, as mere object and immanence. Woman is thereby both culturally and socially denied the subjectivity, autonomy, and creativity that are definitive of being human and that in patriarchal society are accorded the man. At the same time, however, because she is a human existence, the female person necessarily is a subjectivity and transcendence, and she knows herself to be. The female person who

mental activity, given that accomplishing tasks is basic to the structure of human existence, it serves as a better starting point for investigation of feminine motility. As I point out at the end of this essay, a full phenomenology of feminine existence must take account of this noninstrumental movement.

7. It is not impossible, moreover, for men to be "feminine" in at least some respects, according to the above definition.

8. On this level of specificity there also exist particular modalities of masculine motility, inasmuch as there is a particular style of movement more or less typical of men. I will not, however, be concerned with those in this essay.

9. See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, chapter 21, "Woman's Situation and Character."

enacts the existence of women in patriarchal society must therefore live a contradiction: as human she is a free subject who participates in transcendence, but her situation as a woman denies her that subjectivity and transcendence. My suggestion is that the modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality exhibit this same tension between transcendence and immanence, between subjectivity and being a mere object.

Section I offers some specific observations about bodily comportment, physical engagement with things, ways of using the body in performing tasks, and bodily self-image, which I find typical of feminine existence. Section II gives a general phenomenological account of the modalities of feminine bodily comportment and motility. Section III develops these modalities further in terms of the spatiality generated by them. Finally, in section IV, I draw out some of the implications of this account for an understanding of the oppression of women as well as raise some further questions about feminine being-in-the-world that require further investigation.

I

The basic difference that Straus observes between the way boys and girls throw is that girls do not bring their whole bodies into the motion as much as the boys do. They do not reach back, twist, move backward, step, and lean forward. Rather, the girls tend to remain relatively immobile except for their arms, and even the arms are not extended as far as they could be. Throwing is not the only movement in which there is a typical difference in the way men and women use their bodies. Reflection on feminine comportment and body movement in other physical activities reveals that these also are frequently characterized, much as in the throwing case, by a failure to make full use of the body's spatial and lateral potentialities.

Even in the most simple body orientations of men and women as they sit, stand, and walk, one can observe a typical difference in body style and extension. Women generally are not as open with their bodies as are men in their gait and stride. Typically, the masculine stride is longer proportional to a man's body than is the feminine stride to a woman's. The man typically swings his arms in a more open and loose fashion than does a woman and typically has more up and down rhythm in his step. Though we now wear pants more than we used to and consequently do not have to restrict our sitting postures because of dress, women still tend to sit with their legs relatively close together and their arms across their bodies. When simply standing or leaning, men tend to keep their feet farther apart than do women, and we also tend more to keep our hands and arms touching or shielding our bodies. A final indicative difference is the way each carries books or parcels; girls and

women most often carry books embraced to their chests, while boys and men swing them along their sides.

The approach that people of each sex take to the performance of physical tasks that require force, strength, and muscular coordination is frequently different. There are indeed real physical differences between men and women in the kind and limit of their physical strength. Many of the observed differences between men and women in the performance of tasks requiring coordinated strength, however, are due not so much to brute muscular strength as to the way each sex *uses* the body in approaching tasks. Women often do not perceive themselves as capable of lifting and carrying heavy things, pushing and shoving with significant force, pulling, squeezing, grasping, or twisting with force. When we attempt such tasks, we frequently fail to summon the full possibilities of our muscular coordination, position, poise, and bearing. Women tend not to put their whole bodies into engagement in a physical task with the same ease and naturalness as men. For example, in attempting to lift something, women more often than men fail to plant themselves firmly and make their thighs bear the greatest proportion of the weight. Instead, we tend to concentrate our effort on those parts of the body most immediately connected to the task—the arms and shoulders—rarely bringing the power of the legs to the task at all. When turning or twisting something, to take another example, we frequently concentrate effort in the hand and wrist, not bringing to the task the power of the shoulder, which is necessary for its efficient performance.¹⁰

The previously cited throwing example can be extended to a great deal of athletic activity. Now, most men are by no means superior athletes, and their sporting efforts display bravado more often than genuine skill and coordination. The relatively untrained man nevertheless engages in sport generally with more free motion and open reach than does his female counterpart. Not only is there a typical style of throwing like a girl, but there is a more or less typical style of running like a girl, climbing like a girl, swinging like a girl, hitting like a girl. They have in common first that the whole body is not put into fluid and directed motion, but rather, in swinging and hitting, for example, the motion is concentrated in one body part; and second that the woman's motion tends not to reach, extend, lean, stretch, and follow through in the direction of her intention.

For many women as they move in sport, a space surrounds us in imagination that we are not free to move beyond; the space available to our movement is a constricted space. Thus, for example, in softball or

10. It should be noted that this is probably typical only of women in advanced industrial societies, where the model of the bourgeois woman has been extended to most women. It would not apply to those societies, for example, where most people, including women, do heavy physical work. Nor does this particular observation, of course, hold true in our own society for women who do heavy physical work.

volleyball women tend to remain in one place more often than men do, neither jumping to reach nor running to approach the ball. Men more often move out toward a ball in flight and confront it with their own counter-motion. Women tend to wait for and then *react* to its approach, rather than going forth to meet it. We frequently respond to the motion of a ball coming toward us as though it were coming *at* us, and our immediate bodily impulse is to flee, duck, or otherwise protect ourselves from its flight. Less often than men, moreover, do women give self-conscious direction and placement to their motion in sport. Rather than aiming at a certain place where we wish to hit a ball, for example, we tend to hit it in a "general" direction.

Women often approach a physical engagement with things with timidity, uncertainty, and hesitancy. Typically, we lack an entire trust in our bodies to carry us to our aims. There is, I suggest, a double hesitation here. On the one hand, we often lack confidence that we have the capacity to do what must be done. Many times I have slowed a hiking party in which the men bounded across a harmless stream while I stood on the other side warily testing my footing on various stones, holding on to overhanging branches. Though the others crossed with ease, I do not believe it is easy for *me*, even though once I take a committed step I am across in a flash. The other side of this tentativeness is, I suggest, a fear of getting hurt, which is greater in women than in men. Our attention is often divided between the aim to be realized in motion and the body that must accomplish it, while at the same time saving itself from harm. We often experience our bodies as a fragile encumbrance, rather than the medium for the enactment of our aims. We feel as though we must have our attention directed upon our bodies to make sure they are doing what we wish them to do, rather than paying attention to what we want to do *through* our bodies.

All the above factors operate to produce in many women a greater or lesser feeling of incapacity, frustration, and self-consciousness. We have more of a tendency than men do to greatly underestimate our bodily capacity.¹¹ We decide beforehand—usually mistakenly—that the task is beyond us and thus give it less than our full effort. At such a halfhearted level, of course, we cannot perform the tasks, become frustrated, and fulfill our own prophecy. In entering a task we frequently are self-conscious about appearing awkward and at the same time do not wish to appear too strong. Both worries contribute to our awkwardness and frustration. If we should finally release ourselves from this spiral and really give a physical task our best effort, we are greatly surprised indeed

11. See A. M. Gross, "Estimated versus Actual Physical Strength in Three Ethnic Groups," *Child Development* 39 (1968): 283–90. In a test of children at several different ages, at all but the youngest age level, girls rated themselves lower than boys rated themselves on self-estimates of strength, and as the girls grow older, their self-estimates of strength become even lower.

at what our bodies can accomplish. It has been found that women more often than men underestimate the level of achievement they have reached.¹²

None of the observations that have been made thus far about the way women typically move and comport their bodies applies to all women all of the time. Nor do those women who manifest some aspect of this typicality do so in the same degree. There is no inherent, mysterious connection between these sorts of typical comportments and being a female person. Many of them result, as will be developed later, from lack of practice in using the body and performing tasks. Even given these qualifications, one can nevertheless sensibly speak of a general feminine style of body comportment and movement. The next section will develop a specific categorical description of the modalities of the comportment and movement.

II

The three modalities of feminine motility are that feminine movement exhibits an *ambiguous transcendence*, an *inhibited intentionality*, and a *discontinuous unity* with its surroundings. A source of these contradictory modalities is the bodily self-reference of feminine comportment, which derives from the woman's experience of her body as a *thing* at the same time that she experiences it as a capacity.

1. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*,¹³ Merleau-Ponty takes as his task the articulation of the primordial structures of existence, which are prior to and the ground of all reflective relation to the world. In asking how there can be a world for a subject, Merleau-Ponty reorients the entire tradition of that questioning by locating subjectivity not in mind or consciousness, but in the *body*. Merleau-Ponty gives to the lived body the ontological status that Sartre, as well as "intellectualist" thinkers before him, attribute to consciousness alone: the status of transcendence as being for itself. It is the body in its orientation toward and action upon and within its surroundings that constitutes the initial meaning-giving act (121, 146–47). The body is the first locus of intentionality, as pure presence to the world and openness upon its possibilities. The most primordial intentional act is the motion of the body orienting itself with respect to and moving within its surroundings. There is a world for a

12. See Marguerite A. Cifton and Hope M. Smith, "Comparison of Expressed Self-Concept of Highly Skilled Males and Females Concerning Motor Performance," *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 16 (1963): 199–201. Women consistently underestimated their level of achievement in skills such as running and jumping far more often than men did.

13. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962). All references to this work are noted in parentheses in the text.

subject just insofar as the body has capacities by which it can approach, grasp, and appropriate its surroundings in the direction of its intentions.

While feminine bodily existence is a transcendence and openness to the world, it is an *ambiguous transcendence*, a transcendence that is at the same time laden with immanence. Now, once we take the locus of subjectivity and transcendence to be the lived body rather than pure consciousness, all transcendence is ambiguous because the body as natural and material is immanence. But it is not the ever-present possibility of any lived body to be passive, to be touched as well as touching, to be grasped as well as grasping, which I am referring to here as the ambiguity of the transcendence of the feminine lived body. The transcendence of the lived body that Merleau-Ponty describes is a transcendence that moves out from the body in its immanence in an open and unbroken directedness upon the world in action. The lived body as transcendence is pure fluid action, the continuous calling-forth of capacities that are applied to the world. Rather than simply beginning in immanence, feminine bodily existence remains in immanence or, better, is *overlaid* with immanence, even as it moves out toward the world in motions of grasping, manipulating, and so on.

In the previous section, I observed that a woman typically refrains from throwing her whole body into a motion and rather concentrates motion in one part of the body alone, while the rest of the body remains relatively immobile. Only part of the body, that is, moves out toward a task, while the rest remains rooted in immanence. I also observed earlier that a woman frequently does not trust the capacity of her body to engage itself in physical relation to things. Consequently, she often lives her body as a burden, which must be dragged and prodded along and at the same time protected.

2. Merleau-Ponty locates intentionality in motility (110–12); the possibilities that are opened up in the world depend on the mode and limits of the bodily “I can” (137, 148). Feminine existence, however, often does not enter bodily relation to possibilities by its own comportment toward its surroundings in an unambiguous and confident “I can.” For example, as noted earlier, women frequently tend to posit a task that would be accomplished relatively easily once attempted as beyond their capacities before they begin it. Typically, the feminine body underuses its real capacity, both as the potentiality of its physical size and strength and as the real skills and coordination that are available to it. Feminine bodily existence is an *inhibited intentionality*, which simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an “I can” and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed “I cannot.”¹⁴

14. Much of the work of Seymour Fisher on various aspects of sex differences in body image correlates suggestively with the phenomenological description developed here. It is difficult to use his conclusions as confirmation of that description, however, because there

An uninhibited intentionality projects the aim to be accomplished and connects the body's motion toward that end in an unbroken directedness that organizes and unifies the body's activity. The body's capacity and motion structure its surroundings and project meaningful possibilities of movement and action, which in turn call the body's motion forth to enact them: “To understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance” (144; see also 101, 131, and 132). Feminine motion often severs this mutually conditioning relation between aim and enactment. In those motions that when properly performed require the coordination and directedness of the whole body upon some definite end, women frequently move in a contradictory way. Their bodies project an aim to be enacted but at the same time stiffen against the performance of the task. In performing a physical task the woman's body does carry her toward the intended aim, often not easily and directly, but rather circuitously, with the wasted motion resulting from the effort of testing and reorientation, which is a frequent consequence of feminine hesitancy.

For any lived body, the world appears as the system of possibilities that are correlative to its intentions (131). For any lived body, moreover, the world also appears to be populated with opacities and resistances correlative to its own limits and frustrations. For any bodily existence, that is, an “I cannot” may appear to set limits to the “I can.” To the extent that feminine bodily existence is an inhibited intentionality, however, the same set of possibilities that appears to be correlative to its intentions also appears to be a system of frustrations correlative to its hesitations. By repressing or withholding its own motile energy, feminine bodily existence frequently projects an “I can” and an “I cannot” with respect to the very same end. When the woman enters a task with inhibited intentionality, she projects the possibilities of that task—thus projects an “I can”—but projects them merely as the possibilities of “someone,” and not truly *her* possibilities—and thus projects an “I cannot.”

3. Merleau-Ponty gives to the body the unifying and synthesizing function that Kant locates in transcendental subjectivity. By projecting an aim toward which it moves, the body brings unity to and unites itself with its surroundings; through the vectors of its projected possibilities it sets things in relation to one another and to itself. The body's movement

is something of a speculative aspect to his reasoning. Nevertheless, I shall refer to some of these findings with that qualification in mind.

One of Fisher's findings is that women have a greater anxiety about their legs than men do, and he cites earlier studies with the same results. Fisher interprets such leg anxiety as being anxiety about motility itself, because in body conception and body image the legs are the body parts most associated with motility. See Fisher, *Body Experience in Fantasy and Behavior* (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1970), 537. If his findings and his interpretation are accurate, this tends to correlate with the sort of inhibition and timidity about movement that I am claiming is an aspect of feminine body comportment.

and orientation organizes the surrounding space as a continuous extension of its own being (143). Within the same act in which the body synthesizes its surroundings, moreover, it synthesizes itself. The body synthesis is immediate and primordial. "I do not bring together one by one the parts of my body; this translation and this unification are performed once and for all within me: they are my body itself" (150).

The third modality of feminine bodily existence is that it stands in *discontinuous unity* with both itself and its surroundings. I remarked earlier that in many motions that require the active engagement and coordination of the body as a whole in order to be performed properly, women tend to locate their motion in part of the body only, leaving the rest of the body relatively immobile. Motion such as this is discontinuous with itself. The part of the body that is transcending toward an aim is in relative disunity from those that remain immobile. The undirected and wasted motion that is often an aspect of feminine engagement in a task also manifests this lack of body unity. The character of the inhibited intentionality whereby feminine motion severs the connection between aim and enactment, between possibility in the world and capacity in the body, itself produces this discontinuous unity.

According to Merleau-Ponty, for the body to exist as a transcendent presence to the world and the immediate enactment of intentions, it cannot exist as an *object* (123). As subject, the body is referred not onto itself, but onto the world's possibilities. "In order that we may be able to move our body towards an object, the object must first exist for it, our body must not belong to the realm of the 'in-itself'" (139). The three contradictory modalities of feminine bodily existence—ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity—have their root, however, in the fact that for feminine existence the body frequently is both subject and object for itself at the same time and in reference to the same act. Feminine bodily existence is frequently not a pure presence to the world because it is referred onto *itself* as well as onto possibilities in the world.¹⁵

Several of the observations of the previous section illustrate this self-reference. It was observed, for example, that women have a tendency to take up the motion of an object coming *toward* them as coming *at* them. I also observed that women tend to have a latent and sometimes conscious fear of getting hurt, which we bring to a motion. That is, feminine bodily existence is self-referred in that the woman takes herself to be the

15. Fisher finds that the most striking difference between men and women in their general body image is that women have a significantly higher degree of what he calls "body prominence," awareness of and attention to the body. He cites a number of different studies that have the same results. The explanation Fisher gives for this finding is that women are socialized to pay attention to their bodies, to prune and dress them, and to worry about how they look to others. Fisher, *Body Experience in Fantasy and Behavior*, 524–25. See also Fisher, "Sex Differences in Body Perception," *Psychological Monographs* 78 (1964), no. 14.

object of the motion rather than its originator. Feminine bodily existence is also self-referred to the extent that a woman is uncertain of her body's capacities and does not feel that its motions are entirely under her control. She must divide her attention between the task to be performed and the body that must be coaxed and manipulated into performing it. Finally, feminine bodily existence is self-referred to the extent that the feminine subject posits her motion as the motion that is *looked at*. In section IV, we will explore the implications of the basic fact of the woman's social existence as the object of the gaze of another, which is a major source of her bodily self-reference.

In summary, the modalities of feminine bodily existence have their root in the fact that feminine existence experiences the body as a mere thing—a fragile thing, which must be picked up and coaxed into movement, a thing that exists as *looked at and acted upon*. To be sure, any lived body exists as a material thing as well as a transcending subject. For feminine bodily existence, however, the body is often lived as a thing that is other than it, a thing like other things in the world. To the extent that a woman lives her body as a thing, she remains rooted in immanence, is inhibited, and retains a distance from her body as transcending movement and from engagement in the world's possibilities.

III

For Merleau-Ponty there is a distinction between lived space, or phenomenal space, and objective space, the uniform space of geometry and science in which all positions are external to one another and interchangeable. Phenomenal space arises out of motility, and lived relations of space are generated by the capacities of the body's motion and the intentional relations that that motion constitutes. "It is clearly in action that the spatiality of our body is brought into being and an analysis of one's own movement should enable us to arrive at a better understanding" (102, cf. 148, 149, 249). In this account, if there are particular modalities of feminine bodily comportment and motility, it must follow that there are also particular modalities of feminine spatiality. Feminine existence lives space as *enclosed* or confining, as having a *dual* structure, and the woman experiences herself as *positioned* in space.

1. There is a famous study that Erik Erikson performed several years ago in which he asked several male and female preadolescents to construct a scene for an imagined movie out of some toys. He found that girls typically depicted indoor settings, with high walls and enclosures, while boys typically constructed outdoor scenes. He concluded that females tend to emphasize what he calls "inner space," or enclosed space, while males tend to emphasize what he calls "outer space," or a spatial orientation that is open and outwardly directed. Erikson's interpretation

the projection of the enclosed space of their wombs and vaginas; boys depict "outer space" as a projection of the phallus.¹⁶ I find such an explanation wholly unconvincing. If girls do tend to project an enclosed space and boys to project in open and outwardly directed space, it is far more plausible to regard this as a reflection of the way members of each sex live and move their bodies in space.

In the first section, I observed that women tend not to open their bodies in their everyday movements, but tend to sit, stand, and walk with their limbs close to or closed around them. I also observed that women tend not to reach, stretch, bend, lean, or stride to the full limits of their physical capacities, even when doing so would better accomplish a task or motion. The space, that is, that is *physically* available to the feminine body is frequently of greater radius than the space that she uses and inhabits. Feminine existence appears to posit an existential enclosure between herself and the space surrounding her, in such a way that the space that belongs to her and is available to her grasp and manipulation is constricted and the space beyond is not available to her movement.¹⁷ A further illustration of this confinement of feminine lived space is the observation already noted that in sport, for example, women tend not to move out and meet the motion of a ball, but rather tend to stay in one place and react to the ball's motion only when it has arrived within the space where she is. The timidity, immobility, and uncertainty that frequently characterize feminine movement project a limited space for the feminine "I can."

2. In Merleau-Ponty's account, the body unity of transcending performance creates an immediate link between the body and the outlying space. "Each instant of the movement embraces its whole space, and particularly the first which, by being active and initiative, institutes the link between a here and a yonder" (140). In feminine existence, however, the projection of an enclosed space severs the continuity between a "here" and a "yonder." In feminine existence there is a *double spatiality*, as the space of the "here" is distinct from the space of the "yonder." A distinction between space that is "yonder" and not linked with my own body possibilities and the enclosed space that is "here," which I inhabit with my bodily possibilities, is an expression of the discontinuity between aim and capacity to realize the aim that I have articulated as the

16. Erik H. Erikson, "Inner and Outer Space: Reflections on Womanhood," *Daedalus* 3 (1964): 582-606. Erikson's interpretation of his findings is also sexist. Having in his opinion discovered a particular significance that "inner space," which he takes to be space *within* the body, holds for girls, he goes on to discuss the womanly "nature" as womb and potential mother, which must be made compatible with anything else the woman does.

17. Another of Fisher's findings is that women experience themselves as having more clearly articulated body *boundaries* than men do. More clearly than men do, they distinguish themselves from their spatial surroundings and take a distance from them. See Fisher, *Body Experience in Fantasy and Behavior*, 528.

meaning of the tentativeness and uncertainty characterizing the inhibited intentionality of feminine motility. The space of the "yonder" is a space in which feminine existence projects possibilities in the sense of understanding that "someone" could move within it, but not I. Thus the space of the "yonder" exists for feminine existence, but only as that which she is looking into, rather than moving in.

3. The third modality of feminine spatiality is that feminine existence experiences itself as *positioned in* space. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is the original subject that constitutes space; there would be no space without the body (102, 142). As the origin and subject of spatial relations, the body does not occupy a position coequal and interchangeable with the positions occupied by other things (143, 247-49). Because the body as lived is not an *object*, it cannot be said to exist *in* space as water is *in* the glass (139-40). "The word 'here' applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external coordinates, but the laying down of the first coordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, the situation of the body in the face of its tasks" (100).

Feminine spatiality is contradictory insofar as feminine bodily existence is both spatially constituted and a constituting spatial subject. Insofar as feminine existence lives the body as transcendence and intentionality, the feminine body actively constitutes space and is the original coordinate that unifies the spatial field and projects spatial relations and positions in accord with its intentions. But to the extent that feminine motility is laden with immanence and inhibited, the body's space is lived as constituted. To the extent, that is, that feminine bodily existence is self-referred and thus lives itself as an *object*, the feminine body does exist *in* space. In section I, I observed that women frequently react to motions, even our own motions, as though we are the object of a motion that issues from an alien intention, rather than taking ourselves as the subject of motion. In its immanence and inhibition, feminine spatial existence is *positioned* by a system of coordinates that does not have its origin in a woman's own intentional capacities. The tendency for the feminine body to remain partly immobile in the performance of a task that requires the movement of the whole body illustrates this characteristic of feminine bodily existence as rooted *in place*. Likewise does the tendency of women to wait for an object to come within their immediate bodily field, rather than move out toward it.

Merleau-Ponty devotes a great deal of attention to arguing that the diverse senses and activities of the lived body are synthetically related in such a way that each stands in a mutually conditioning relation with all the others. In particular, visual perception and motility stand in a relation of reversability; an impairment in the functioning of one, for example, leads to an impairment in the functioning of the other (133-37). If we assume that reversability of visual perception and motility, the previous account of the modalities of feminine motility and the spatiality that

arises from them suggests that visual space will have its own modalities as well.

Numerous psychological studies have reported differences between the sexes in the character of spatial perception. One of the most frequently discussed of these conclusions is that females are more often "field-dependent." That is, it has been claimed that males have a greater capacity for lifting a figure out of its spatial surroundings and viewing relations in space as fluid and interchangeable, whereas females have a greater tendency to regard figures as embedded within and fixed by their surroundings.¹⁸ The above account of feminine motility and spatiality gives some theoretical intelligibility to these findings. If feminine body spatiality is such that the woman experiences herself as rooted and enclosed, on the reversability assumption it would follow that visual space for feminine existence also has its closures of immobility and fixity. The objects in visual space do not stand in a fluid system of potentially alterable and interchangeable relations correlative to the body's various intentions and projected capacities. Rather, they too have their own *places* and are anchored in their immanence.

IV

The modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality that I have described here are, I claim, common to the existence of women in contemporary society to one degree or another. They have their source, however, in neither anatomy nor physiology, and certainly not in a mysterious feminine essence. Rather, they have their source in the particular *situation* of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society.

Women in sexist society are physically handicapped. Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified. As lived bodies we are not open and unambiguous transcendences that move out to master a world that belongs to

18. The number of studies with these results is enormous. See Eleanor E. Maccoby and Carol N. Jacklin, *The Psychology of Sex Differences* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974), 91–98. For a number of years psychologists used the results from tests of spatial ability to generalize about field independence in general, and from that to general "analytic" ability. Thus it was concluded that women have less analytical ability than men do. More recently, however, such generalizations have been seriously called into question. See, for example, Julia A. Sherman, "Problems of Sex Differences in Space Perception and Aspects of Intellectual Functioning," *Psychological Review* 74 (1967): 290–99. She notes that while women are consistently found to be more field-dependent in spatial tasks than men are, on nonspatial tests measuring field independence, women generally perform as well as men do.

us, a world constituted by our own intentions and projections. To be sure, there are actual women in contemporary society to whom all or part of the above description does not apply. Where these modalities are not manifest in or determinative of the existence of a particular woman, however, they are definitive in a negative mode—as that which she has escaped, through accident or good fortune, or, more often, as that which she has had to overcome.

One of the sources of the modalities of feminine bodily existence is too obvious to dwell upon at length. For the most part, girls and women are not given the opportunity to use their full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world, nor are they encouraged as much as boys are to develop specific bodily skills.¹⁹ Girls' play is often more sedentary and enclosing than the play of boys. In school and after-school activities girls are not encouraged to engage in sport, in the controlled use of their bodies in achieving well-defined goals. Girls, moreover, get little practice at "tinkering" with things and thus at developing spatial skill. Finally, girls are not often asked to perform tasks demanding physical effort and strength, while as the boys grow older they are asked to do so more and more.²⁰

The modalities of feminine bodily existence are not merely privative, however, and thus their source is not merely in lack of practice, though this is certainly an important element. There is a specific positive style of feminine body comportment and movement, which is learned as the girl comes to understand that she is a girl. The young girl acquires many subtle habits of feminine body comportment—walking like a girl, tilting her head like a girl, standing and sitting like a girl, gesturing like a girl, and so on. The girl learns actively to hamper her movements. She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her. Thus she develops a bodily timidity that increases with age. In assuming herself to be a girl, she takes herself to be fragile. Studies have found that young children of both sexes categorically assert that girls are more likely to get hurt than boys are,²¹ and that girls ought to remain close to home,

19. Nor are girls provided with example of girls and women being physically active. See Mary E. Duquin, "Differential Sex Role Socialization toward Amplitude Appropriation," *Research Quarterly* (American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation) 48 (1977): 188–92. A survey of textbooks for young children revealed that children are thirteen times more likely to see a vigorously active man than a vigorously active woman and three times more likely to see a relatively active man than a relatively active woman.

20. Sherman, "Problems of Sex Differences," argues that it is the differential socialization of boys and girls in being encouraged to "tinker," explore, etc., that accounts for the difference between the two in spatial ability.

21. See L. Kolberg, "A Cognitive-Developmental Analysis of Children's Sex-Role Concepts and Attitudes," in *The Development of Sex Differences*, ed. E. E. Maccoby (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1966), 101.

while boys can roam and explore.²² The more a girl assumes her status as feminine, the more she takes herself to be fragile and immobile and the more she actively enacts her own body inhibition. When I was about thirteen, I spent hours practicing a "feminine" walk, which was stiff and closed, and rotated from side to side.

Studies that record observations of sex differences in spatial perception, spatial problem-solving, and motor skills have also found that these differences tend to increase with age. While very young children show virtually no differences in motor skills, movement, spatial perception, etc., differences seem to appear in elementary school and increase with adolescence. If these findings are accurate, they would seem to support the conclusion that it is in the process of growing up as a girl that the modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality make their appearance.²³

There is, however, a further source of the modalities of feminine bodily existence that is perhaps even more profound than these. At the root of those modalities, I have stated in the previous section, is the fact that the woman lives her body as *object* as well as subject. The source of this is that patriarchal society defines woman as object, as a mere body, and that in sexist society women are in fact frequently regarded by others as objects and mere bodies. An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention.²⁴ The source of this objectified bodily existence is in the attitude of others regarding her, but the woman herself often actively takes up her body as a mere thing. She gazes at it in the mirror, worries about how it looks to others, prunes it, shapes it, molds and decorates it.

This objectified bodily existence accounts for the self-consciousness of the feminine relation to her body and resulting distance she takes from her body. As human, she is a transcendence and subjectivity and cannot live herself as mere bodily object. Thus, to the degree that she does live herself as mere body, she cannot be in unity with herself but must take a distance from and exist in discontinuity with her body. The

22. Lenore J. Weitzman, "Sex Role Socialization," in *Woman: A Feminist Perspective*, ed. Jo Freeman (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1975), 111-12.

23. Maccoby and Jacklin, *The Psychology of Sex Differences*, 93-94.

24. The manner in which women are objectified by the gaze of the Other is not the same phenomenon as the objectification by the Other that is a condition of self-consciousness in Sartre's account. See *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), part 3. While the basic ontological category of being for others is objectified for itself, the objectification that women are subject to is being regarded as a mere in itself. On the particular dynamic of sexual objectification, see Sandra Bartky, "Psychological Oppression," in *Philosophy and Women*, ed. Sharon Bishop and Marjories Weinzwieg (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1979), 33-41.

objectifying regard that "keeps her in her place" can also account for the spatial modality of being positioned and for why women frequently tend not to move openly, keeping their limbs closed around themselves. To open her body in free, active, open extension and bold outward-directedness is for a woman to invite objectification.

The threat of being seen is, however, not the only threat of objectification that the woman lives. She also lives the threat of invasion of her body space. The most extreme form of such spatial and bodily invasion is the threat of rape. But we daily are subject to the possibility of bodily invasion in many far more subtle ways as well. It is acceptable, for example, for women to be touched in ways and under circumstances that it is not acceptable for men to be touched, and by persons—i.e., men—whom it is not acceptable for them to touch.²⁵ I would suggest that the enclosed space that has been described as a modality of feminine spatiality is in part a defense against such invasion. Women tend to project an existential barrier closed around them and discontinuous with the "over there" in order to keep the other at a distance. The woman lives her space as confined and closed around her, at least in part as projecting some small area in which she can exist as a free subject.

This essay is a prolegomenon to the study of aspects of women's experience and situation that have not received the treatment they warrant. I would like to close with some questions that require further thought and research. This essay has concentrated its attention upon the sorts of physical tasks and body orientation that involve the whole body in gross movement. Further investigation into woman's bodily existence would require looking at activities that do not involve the whole body and finer movement. If we are going to develop an account of the woman's body experience in situation, moreover, we must reflect on the modalities of a woman's experience of her body in its sexual being, as well as upon less task-oriented body activities, such as dancing. Another question that arises is whether the description given here would apply equally well to any sort of physical task. Might the kind of task, and specifically whether it is a task or movement that is sex-typed, have some effect on the modalities of feminine bodily existence? A further question is to what degree we can develop a theoretical account of the connection between the modalities of the bodily existence of women and other aspects of our existence and experience. For example, I have an intuition that the general lack of confidence that we frequently have about our cognitive or leadership abilities is traceable in part to an original doubt of our body's capacity. None of these questions can be dealt with properly, however, without first performing the kind of guided observation and data collection that my reading has concluded, to a large degree, is yet to be performed.

25. See Nancy Henley and Jo Freeman, "The Sexual Politics of Interpersonal Behavior," in Freeman, *Woman: A Feminist Perspective*, 391-401.